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JROTC programs earn a salute

Events raise level of respect for participants



Mark Henle/The Arizona Republic
Thunderbird High JROTC Drill Team members Adrian Garcia Segal and Chris Franovich practice for a parade.

By Connie Cone Sexton

Valley high school students in Junior ROTC programs are noticing a little more R-E-S-P-E-C-T these days.

Not that long ago, it wasn't unusual to hear a snicker or two from fellow students when they'd wear the uniform to school.

That all changed with the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. Now the JROTC students say they're getting pats on the back and admiring glances from their peers.

Leaders of the programs are hearing a little more pride in the voices of their students, too.

Army Maj. William Thompson welcomes the change. He has led the program for 16 years at

Camelback High School in the Phoenix Union High School District.

"In past years, when we issued the Army (JROTC) uniform and told the kids they had to wear it one day a week, they felt the peer pressure," he said. "But this year, they've been banging on the door to get the uniform as quickly as possible."

About 195 students are in the program at Camelback, a 25 percent increase over last year, Thompson said.

Like in most districts, students in the JROTC program take a class during the school day along with either morning or afternoon requirements.

"We say the pledge every class hour, and they're saying it with a lot of emotion, very loudly now," Thompson said. "In the past, you had to prod them a bit."

The cadets in the Army, Air Force or Navy JROTC programs are being asked a bit more often by school officials and local organizations to perform color guard and other formations.

Even teachers on campus seem more aware of their presence, said 17-year-old Stacy O'Connor, a senior at Thunderbird High School in the Glendale Union High School District.

"And students are saying, 'You look good. Did you wear that last year?'"

O'Connor has been in the JROTC program for four years.

"Now that things are out of whack in the country, we're relying more on each other," she said.

"We've become a closer family."

Adrian Garcia Segal, also a senior at Thunderbird, is the company commander and part of a drill team with arms. The 17-year-old has been in the program all four years.

"Friends look at you now and say, 'Hey, you look good.' And I'll go shopping and people will come up to you and say, 'At least we have people like you.' It makes you realize that you're vulnerable as a person," he said, "that anything can happen at any time."

Lt. Col. Michael Babb directs all of the Army JROTC programs in the Phoenix Union High School District.

He is glad to see more pride in students.

"We're less military and more about citizenship," he said. "We give students a sense of discipline and organization, which makes them better students."

Dan Gray, the senior naval-science instructor for the Navy JROTC program at Apollo High School, said he had heard positive comments from both students and fellow teachers about seeing the students wear their uniforms.

Jack Coyle, who leads the JROTC program at Maryvale High School, said some students who aren't even in the program have been coming around more to watch the group practice its formations.

"The kids are hanging out just to be part of us," he said.

The newfound interest has spread to the community as well.

Lt. Ronald Maul said his Navy JROTC at Thunderbird High School used to get one invitation or two a month to have the color guard appear. Now he's getting three phone calls a day. "They want us to appear at everything from garden parties to the Bank One Ballpark," he said. "It's become extremely popular to have a marching color guard present the colors. The demonstration of patriotism is wonderful. It's long overdue."

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